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## LEON GORDON AS A POET.

## I.

*Epic Poems.*

THE tribute paid to Oliver Goldsmith that there was not a department of literature he did not touch upon, and that he touched nothing without adorning it, may with justice be applied to Gordon also. Whatever he wrote bore the stamp of so pronounced an originality as to be recognized immediately as belonging to him; for imitation was travesty. His stories and sketches mirror the life he saw around him, and move us now to tears, now to smiles, according to the fancy of the writer. But neither his stories nor his sketches, humorous to the extreme, add anything to Gordon's fame; they only show his versatility. To another man these minor productions of Gordon would have been sufficient to establish a literary reputation, but Gordon's fame rests solely on his poetic works, to which we shall now direct our attention. A few introductory remarks about the development of modern Hebrew poetry will, we hope, not be superfluous.

Ever since the close of the golden period of Hebrew literature in the middle ages, the time of Gabirol, Jehudah Halevi, Charizi and Emanuel the Roman, there was no great singer in Israel, no poet in the true significance of the word. Poetry was confined to liturgical compositions, prayers, praises, supplications, and lamentations. Israel was constantly humbled and persecuted; and the afflictions of the exile found expression in an occasional hymn which sought to affirm Israel's eternal faith in God, or to appeal to divine mercy to put an end to his tribulations. These were adopted in the liturgy, and proved a source of con-

solation and strength to the unhappy children of oppression. The muse was confined to sacred subjects. How could they sing of love, of nature, and of beauty when their life was a series of miseries and tears? Even when brighter days dawned for Israel, the Hebrew muse that had slumbered so long was reluctant to awake. Moses Zacut (sixteenth century) and Moses Hayim Luzzatto (seventeenth century) wrote plays; but while the latter evinced true poetic gifts, the subjects of their compositions had no relation to life, and Zacut's style was not really poetic.

The period of the Measephim (eighteenth century) marks a new departure in Hebrew poetry. Hartwig Wessely, the poet of the period, wrote an epic on Moses, which, in form at least, surpassed all other contemporary poetic compositions in Hebrew. His language is purer and more forcible than that of his predecessors, and his metre is quite flowing and easy. But Wessely was not a creator. The matter was given him; he added nothing of his own, but merely adopted the biblical account of the Exodus with that of the Midrashim, and composed them into a harmonious whole. His pictures do not excite our imagination, nor does his grandiloquence stir our hearts and our feelings. In his original poems he is weak. Outside of the above-mentioned epic, neither he nor his contemporaries wrote on Jewish subjects. Most of the writers of the Measephim and the *בכורי העתים* schools, who tried their hands at verse, composed occasional poems to friends, dukes, or princes, or translated poems from other languages. Though the scope of Hebrew poetry was thus enlarged, verses being written on flowers, birds, pastoral scenes, and the like, they had no relation to Jewish life whatever. Inspired as those writers were with the ideal of preaching culture to their people, "they crowed like cocks to rouse Israel from his slumber, and to announce the dawn of a glorious morning."

Of the considerable bulk of Hebrew poetry up to the second half of the nineteenth century there was little

that had true literary merit. Some wrote correct rhymes, but not poetry, while others wrote in a sort of unintelligible jargon. Nearly all who wrote Hebrew verse in Germany, Galicia, and Italy did not possess a complete mastery of the language. Even S. D. Luzzatto wrote poetry but seldom, and his diction was not invariably pure. Werbel wrote good Hebrew, but his poetic powers were limited; Eichenbaum had more poetic talent, but neither was a poet in the true sense of the word. Among them all there was not one whom we might justly compare with Gabirol or Jehudah Halevi.

Abraham Beer Lebensohn was the first modern Hebrew writer of verse that approaches the ideal of a poet. Unlike his predecessors, the themes of his compositions were not mere abstract notions, or stories from the past. He sang of the beauty of life and nature; of death, of human weal and woe, of poverty, of wealth and pity. His songs bore a practical relation to the life around him. His poems gave expression to the ideals of his time. He endeavoured to inculcate upon his readers the beauty of knowledge, and the possibility of harmonizing religion and science. Moreover, Lebensohn was a perfect master of the Hebrew language. His diction was pure and elevated; he had a true sense for style. He enriched the language by coining new poetic terms based on biblical roots, and both his rhythms and rhymes were finished. He even rises occasionally to the height of true poetry, and such lines show the latent possibilities of the man. But Lebensohn mistook the function of the poet. Beauty of language is what he chiefly aimed at, diction was the all in all to him. His main object was to write a model Hebrew for others to imitate; but he was not possessed of deep feelings. He philosophizes and preaches in his poems, but his words fail to move us. "His words come from the head, not from the heart," as Gordon expresses it. He was a grammarian and a philosopher even in his poems. Besides, his poetry had no direct bearing upon Jewish life. The lamentable condition of his brethren under Alexander I and Nicholas I

did not concern him; he was above the people. His sympathy goes out with humanity, and his poems are Jewish only in so far as they are human. Still, he had added dignity to Hebrew poetry, had created a poetic style, and thus paved the way for the two truly great poets that succeeded him: his own son, Micah Joseph Lebensohn, and Leon Gordon<sup>1</sup>.

Micah Joseph Lebensohn was endowed with true poetic gifts, a poet "von Gottes Gnaden." His שירי ציון (*Songs of Zion*) show him as a skilful interpreter of human passions and aspirations, with a profound touch of pathos and a keen appreciation of the beauties of nature. His diction is richly poetic, such, in fact, as the author of the Song of Songs has given us in supreme form. His partial translations of the Aeneid betray sparks of epic possibilities which have something Virgilian in them. Unfortunately, his young life was nipped in its bud; death claimed him before twenty-four summers had hardly shown him the beauties of life. Had he lived, he would undoubtedly have developed into a great national poet. However, it was not given to Hebrew poetry to be enriched by his talents. Happily, Leon Gordon, the friend of his youth, remained to take his place, and he showed what beautiful harmony the Hebrew lyre was capable of when touched by the hand of the master.

Peter Smolensky thus pays his tribute to Gordon, in his forcible Hebrew diction and imagery: "The spirit of poetry struck him with all its might. It created for him expressions which nobody can equal; it opened his eyes to see and to understand, and to paint in faithful colours all that his mind's eye saw. Gordon is a true poet in the fullest meaning of the term, and above all, a Hebrew poet. Poets in other languages, if they do not limit themselves to the drama or narrative poems, sing of birds, of stars, of nature, of spring, of summer and autumn and

<sup>1</sup> See P. Smolensky, וואס ליידר, in *Hashahar*, X, pp. 458-60; and אדם אדם by הכהן בחור משורר in *Hashiloah*, vol. II, pp. 42-48.

cruel winter, when the earth is dressed in a shroud; and through it all there runs an undercurrent of the sighs of the lover and the tears of the beloved, and one hears the piping of the shepherd and the lowing of the flock. But all these are not fit themes for a Hebrew poet. His heart, influenced by the language of his fathers, is full of unrest. His spirit does not exult at the daily natural phenomena; the present is not for him. His language is not given for life; but is a relic of the dead past. The spirit of the poet wanders back into the wilderness, midst the cedars of the Lebanon and the ancient mountains; he sings dirges over the ruins of glorious cities, and he walks knee-deep in the streams of the blood of the slain; his feet stumble on the skulls wherein lofty spirits once dwelt. A three-thousand-year-long cry rings out in his ears; the rattling of bones of human sacrifices disturbs his spirit, and his eyes move over a scroll written on both sides with blood and tears. . . . Can he sing of free birds, of happy rustics and amorous swains, of youths and maidens—that want naught but love? Gordon's poems show us what the eyes of the prophet see; and who can see like him<sup>1</sup>?" Gordon was indeed a true Hebrew poet. He loved his people and their language with all his heart and soul. He looked with reverence upon the past, and with hope and anticipation at the future. But the present was terrible, almost unbearable. As a true poet, he describes what he sees around him. The pictures are not at all pleasant, but, as he himself says:—

ציר אנכי ובימיני חרט :

את אשר אראה עין לעין

אותו אחתאר על לוח בשרר. (כל שירי יל'ג, ח"ד, p. 132.)

I am a painter; brush in hand

Upon the canvas I portray

Whate'er mine eyes behold.—(*Poems*, IV, p. 132.)

<sup>1</sup> *Hashahar*, X, pp. 457-8.

To understand and appreciate Gordon fully one must read and re-read his poems in the original. However, we shall here endeavour to give a cursory review of his poetical works, with such a quotation here and there as may tend to illustrate the subject under review.

כשאדם נער אומר דברי שיר (*When a man is young, he utters words of song*) says the Midrash, and Gordon, full of youthful enthusiasm and inspiration, took to writing a love poem, as most young poets will. But, as a Hebrew poet, he chose as his theme the biblical romance of David and Michal. In lofty and impassioned lines he portrays the career of David,—his persecution by Saul, his love for Saul's daughter, Michal; his wars with the Philistines; his subsequent rise to power, and the estrangement between him and Michal. The story as narrated in the Bible contains all the elements of the epic; hence the poet's inventive genius was not called into play, though there was room for a poetic display of description of nature, of emotion, and of love. The majestic figure of Saul swayed by jealousy and hatred, the romantic career of David who from a shepherd rose to the throne of Israel, all these are depicted by the poet vividly and forcibly in the twelve cantos of *אהבת דוד ומיכל* (*The Love of David and Michal*). The poem certainly has its weak points. Gordon is not an epic poet in its classical sense. His powers of nature description are weak; he cannot interpret the human passions fully; he does not enter into the secret souls of his heroes. His descriptions of nature are couched in biblical quotations, which, to a modern reader, are vague and unimpressive. He cannot describe a landscape in detail, not only because he lacks the expression, but also because he lacks the concept. His language is indeed rich and picturesque, smooth and flowing, like the brook of Siloam; but his imagery is completely without the virtue of originality, it is copied from the Bible. So are his figures of speech. He uses them not because he feels that they represent his thoughts exactly, like Moore's Oriental imagery in "Lallah

Rookh," but because they are ready made for him in the Bible. Nor is there sufficient action in the poem to be worthy of the name of epic. The poet often digresses with apostrophes to Providence (Canto II), Love (Canto IV), Jealousy (Canto V), Happiness (Canto IX), Anger and Hope (Canto X), Duty (Canto XI), which are mediaeval in their notions and not strongly poetic in expression. His portrayal of Michal, in fact of all the beautiful woman creations of his fancy, is nothing but a rhymed version of the Shepherdess in the Canticles. Gordon cannot tear himself away from his model, the Bible.

The above criticism may equally be applied to Gordon's second Davidic poem *מלחמות דוד בפלשתים* (*David's Wars against the Philistines*), though in the two cantos of the latter he rises to the height of a true epic poet, especially in describing the heroic achievements of David's body-guard, and it is more original. Still one cannot fail to recognize in several passages of the two poems a striking similarity to *שלמה וקהל* (*Solomon and Koheleth*) by Lebensohn the younger. In fact it seems as though Gordon had assimilated Lebensohn's poems to such an extent that he unconsciously borrowed some phrases and expressions from him, only the imitation, if we may so term it, is much weaker. Lebensohn, the younger, by far surpasses Gordon in the painting of natural scenery, in describing and analysing emotions, and even in beauty and brevity of diction. With all that, considering that these were the first efforts of a youth of twenty-two, it cannot be denied that they are the production of a gifted poet. Amidst the laxity of his expressions, numerous lines stand out concise, bold and strong, showing a wealth of feeling and force, and his diction is purely biblical throughout. He has shown, as was his intention, that the Hebrew language, stiff and dead as it had been, was living enough and flexible enough to describe scenes which are dear to the heart of every Jew. After all that subject *per se* had nothing in it to arouse his enthusiasm, and to make him soar above the



narrow circle which he had circumscribed for himself. Give him a subject which is nearer his heart, give him a theme which would allow his fancy free scope, and he will display all his powers.

אהבת דוד ומיכל (*The Love of David and Michal*), published in 1857, is introduced by a dedicatory poem to Abraham Beer Lebensohn, in which the young poet feelingly acknowledges his indebtedness to the older man, by—

חלמידך אנכי אף כי לא באתי  
אל בית ספרך קחת מפיד לקח

. . . . .

I am thy pupil, though within thy school  
I did not come instruction to receive.

. . . . .

בנך אני—אף כי לא הולדתני  
אבל אל בנך המת אח הייתי . . .

Thy son I am—though birth thou gavest me not—  
I was a brother to thy son who's gone . . .

Also—

ובתפשי בעט, ובעורני עלם  
אתה היית לי סמל וצלם.

And in my youth when first I seized a pen,  
My lines I patterned after thine.

And he dedicates himself to the service of the Hebrew language in the forcible—

עבר לעברית אנכי עד נצח  
לה כל חושי בי לצמומות מכרתי.

The Hebrew Tongue's eternal slave am I.  
My life with hers fore'er is intertwined.

A promise to which he remained faithful all his life.

His third Davidic poem, דוד וברזילי (*David and Barzilai*), is a pastoral, contrasting the happiness of the peaceful, contented, rustic life with the noisy, treacherous life of the palace. The poet describes the rural retreat of Barzilai, after his generous treatment of the unhappy king David,

and the description savours of the field and the forest, and tells of the thoughts of faith they engender:—

He sees the changes of the eve and morn,  
Beholds the sun, now dying, now reborn,  
The starry hosts that tacitly proclaim  
The glories of Jehovah's awful name;  
And in his heart he feels there is a plan,  
There is a refuge for the soul of man.  
And full of faith and full of hope divine,  
He placid sees the wave of life decline.

(vol. III, p. 154.)

David, broken in body and spirit, finds Barzilai in his retreat, and invites him to accompany him to the capital, there to share with him his regal splendour; but Barzilai delicately declines on account of old age and because—

Better is a poor, but peaceful life  
Than a crown accompanied by strife. (ibid., p. 156.)

The bitter truth strikes home, and the king weeps as he departs.

Another biblical poem belonging to the same cycle, אסנת בת פוטיפרע (*Osnath, Potiphera's Daughter*), is based on the story of Joseph and on the Talmudic legend (Sotah, 13 b) that Potiphera, Joseph's father-in-law, is identical with Potiphar, his former master. The poet describes feelingly the history of Joseph up to his elevation, interwoven with the romance of Joseph's love for Osnath, his master's daughter, who is his pupil, and in whom a feeling of affection for Joseph develops during his sojourn in their house. The language of the poem is free from conceit, and is plain and straightforward. The rhymes are smooth, the versification perfect, the action swift, with a few touches of sympathy interspersed here and there. It is not a great poem, but the reader is carried away by the ease and grace with which the story is told. Osnath's dream and Joseph's interpretation thereof is a happy instance of adaptation from the Greek, it adds to the action, and agrees perfectly with the biblical

characterization of Joseph. The poem is charming because of its simplicity.

His last biblical poem, *צדקיהו בבית הפקודות* (*Zedekiah in Prison*), is a monologue intended to convey the feelings of this most unfortunate king of Judah. Zedekiah is made to denounce Jeremiah in the most bitter terms, and to ascribe to him his own misfortune and the downfall of the nation. His fate had come upon him because he had disobeyed Jeremiah. What business had that priest to meddle in political affairs? Saul was punished for disobeying Samuel. Was it Saul's fault that Samuel did not keep his promise, and came too late? The same with Jeremiah. He demands that the people carry no burden on the Sabbath. Was this the time for observing holidays when the enemy was swarming about Jerusalem? Besides, in what way would the observance of the Sabbath prevent the impending catastrophe? In this way Zedekiah rails at Jeremiah, and complains of the injustice done to him. Gordon looks upon the struggle between Jeremiah and Zedekiah as typical of the strife between the ecclesiastical and temporal powers which has gone on in history from time immemorial. Gordon makes Zedekiah say things which Gordon himself does not agree with, though he is in sympathy with him. The poem, it must be remembered was written in 1879, in the Lithuanian prison where Gordon was confined, and the poetic prisoner used the royal prisoner as a mouth-piece to voice his own grievances, for he too had suffered at the hands of fanatics. At any rate, he could feel with Zedekiah<sup>1</sup>.

The well-known story of the woman and her seven

<sup>1</sup> Lilienblum is indignant at Gordon for allowing Zedekiah to condemn Jeremiah, and tries to show that Jeremiah's political policy was better, and that Zedekiah was a changeling and a coward. He ends his criticism by saying that while one has a right to write anything he pleases, he has no right to publish everything he writes (pp. 16-21, מליץ אחר כתי אלה). Carried away by his indignation, Mr. Lilienblum forgets that he is criticizing not a history but a poem, intending to convey Zedekiah's feeling, and Zedekiah could not possibly have agreed with Mr. Lilienblum.

sons who refused to worship Antiochus is the theme of the poem *האשה וילדיה* (*The Woman and her Children*). The narration is full of pathos and sublimity, and the language corresponds to the thought. *במצולות ים* (*In the Depths of the Sea*), however, is a masterpiece that surpasses in vigour and pathos any other production of Gordon. It is based on a well-known Jewish story relating to the sorrows of the Spanish Jews. A ship carrying Spanish exiles leaves port. Among other passengers there is also found Peninnah, the daughter of the Rabbi of Tortonah, and her mother. The young woman, who only a month ago saw her husband burned at the stake, is still so beautiful that she captivates the heart of the captain, who gives her to understand that should she refuse to become his mistress he would carry all his Jewish passengers to some desert island, and leave them there to their fate, as other captains had done. Peninnah promises to surrender herself to him after all the Jewish exiles are landed safely in some port. After this is done, the ship returns with Peninnah and her mother. But early in the morning of the next day, both Peninnah and her mother, to save themselves from shame, leaped overboard and were drowned in the ocean, martyrs for their brethren:—

The Ocean saw and trembled at the sight,  
And round about the mighty breakers roared,  
While those pure souls—and purer far than gold—  
A martyred grave beneath the billows found,  
And midst the Ocean's mountain peaks reposed.  
Unseen, unwept, beneath the deep they slept,  
The Ocean's rocks their tombstones, and the stars  
Their legend, and the heavenly blue their vault.  
Silent the Moon in pity looked on them;  
Silent the Earth the cloud's mute gaze beheld,  
The Earth that sees a myriad tragedies,  
And never condescends to shed a tear<sup>1</sup>. (vol. III, p. 20.)

<sup>1</sup> The translation of these few lines is only a futile effort on my part to give an idea of the poem, the full strength of which can be felt only in the original. I remember having seen an English translation of this poem, but I can recollect neither the name of the translator nor where it was published.

The last of his historical poems, *בין שיני אריית* (*In the Lion's Teeth*), is told with strong dramatic effect and lofty poetic fervour. It is an incident of the Jewish wars with the Romans. The enemy besieged Jerusalem, and confusion and consternation reigned within the city. Driven by despair, the defenders of Jerusalem determine not to sell their country too cheaply, and prepare themselves for the final attack. Simon, a young patriot, throws himself into the conflict; but before his departure he bids his last farewell to his beloved Martha, who encourages him to fight for his country to the bitter end (vol. III, p. 178).

Simon departs. The Jews are defeated; Simon is carried as a captive to Rome, and Martha is sold as a slave to a Roman matron. The young hero is made to fight with a lion in the arena. Among the spectators is also found Martha, who accompanied her mistress Agrippina to the amphitheatre. Martha recognizes her lover and, with anguish in her soul, watches the outcome of the terrible conflict. At first, Simon succeeds in thrusting his sword into the side of the fierce Lybian lion; but his blade is broken and he can no more defend himself. In despair he raises his eyes and recognizes his Martha in the multitude. He musters up all his courage and attacks the lion bare-handed in the hope that, should he succeed in killing the lion, he might gain Martha's and his own freedom. But his strength fails him. The wounded lion leaps upon him and tears him limb from limb. At this horrible sight a shout of delight rings out from the throats of the savage spectators, but Martha can bear it no longer. A shriek of anguish escapes her; she reels, and expires together with her lover.

The catastrophe that befell the Jewish nation the poet ascribes, as in so many other instances, to the *Weltanschauung* of the Rabbis. For centuries they taught the Law, established schools where they instructed the people to ignore true understanding, to believe in superstition, and to look upon this life as trivial. Instead of teaching handicrafts

and the useful arts, instead of establishing military schools and preparing weapons for the imminent conflict with the Romans, the Rabbis taught—

Within the walls to be immured,  
To row against life's vital stream ;  
Alive in Heaven, dead on Earth ;  
In dream to talk—awake to dream.

(vol. III, pp. 175-6.)

Again—

בעלית בן גוריון נועדו ובאו—  
העל צרכי המלוכה שמו עינים ?  
שם חרב ביד הלכות קבעו ;  
(ibid.) . . . אין שותים יינם . . . אין קורין . . . אין פולין . . . אין שותים יינם . . .

Within Ben Gorion's halls the Rabbis met—  
Did they discuss the nation's crying need ?  
No! sword in hand they argued and decreed :  
One must not drink . . . nor separate . . . nor read . . .

Zeal and patriotism alone cannot avail under such leaders.

The poet bases his views that the Jews were not prepared for war with the Romans on Josephus (*Jewish Wars*, II, vi, 3 ; vii, 3 ; xi. 5). His position was attacked by M. Pines in the *Hamagid*, and by Lilienblum<sup>1</sup>, who defend the position of the Rabbis and roundly abuse Gordon for taking the testimony of the "Traitor Josephus." It seems, however, that Gordon did not so much intend to criticize the ancient Rabbis as his contemporaries, of whom what he said was certainly true ; but writing of an historical epoch he merely made use of the past to illustrate the conditions of the present.

Thus much for his historical poems. In the *Love of David and Michal* he has not yet emancipated himself from the influence of the elder Lebensohn<sup>2</sup>, who had cared more for

<sup>1</sup> מליץ אחד מני אלה (in בקרה לכל שירי יל'ג').

<sup>2</sup> "Ever since I began to understand a book, I could not find among living poets one greater than he (Lebensohn). . . . And I therefore endeavour to imitate him." (*Letters*, vol. I, Letter 3, p. 11. 3.)

the purity and accuracy of diction than for the strength and poetic expression of the thought. In his later poems, however, he by far surpassed his master. "His diction is unsurpassable; pure, like Lebensohn's, but freer and sweeter. Reading him we hear the voice of a Hebrew poet as we heard it in Spain<sup>1</sup>."

But Gordon did not satisfy himself with singing of the past. He desired to show his people the misery of the present in order to prepare them for a happier future. And it was in the "epics of the present" that he showed himself the supreme master of style, humour, and sarcasm. Upon these poems he brought to bear the vast store of Talmudic knowledge and style that he had at his command, and portrayed pictures of life, the like of which cannot be found in any literature, not only because they are Jewish to the core, but also because no poet ever painted such pictures with the faithfulness and vividness of the life they describe. His chief aim in this cycle of poems—consisting of *קיצו של יוד* (*The Dot of a Yod*), *שומרת יבם* (*Waiting for a Brother-in-law*), *אשקא דרספק* (*A Wagon's Axle*), *ושמחת בחגך* (*Rejoice on thy Festival*), and *שני יוסף בן* (*Two Josephs ben Simeon*)—is to bring about religious reforms in Rabbinical Judaism.

The greatest poem of this cycle is *קיצו של יוד* (*The Dot of the Yod*), written in 1876<sup>2</sup>. It is directed against the rigorous interpretation of the laws of divorce by the Rabbis. Bath-Shua was married at the age of seventeen to a certain Hillel, a Talmudic student, and after living with her three years her husband left her to seek his fortune abroad. At first she heard from her husband regularly, but after a few months he ceased corresponding, and nobody knew his whereabouts. Her father died too, and the poor woman, thus left destitute with two children, opened a small store to

<sup>1</sup> Smolensky, *Hashahar*, vol. X, p. 400.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter written in 1879, Gordon claims: "This poem is far superior to its predecessors; it is the best poem I have written so far." (*Letters*, vol. I, p. 202).

support her family. Meanwhile there arrived in Ayolon (the scene where the action is laid) a young man, Fabi, to superintend the railway constructions in the town. He fell in love with Bath-Shua and learned her story. Through a friend in Liverpool he learned that Hillel was peddling there, and that he would be willing to divorce his wife according to Jewish law, for a consideration of 500 roubles, with which he intended to go to America. Fabi sent the money, and the Get, or bill of divorce, arrived in Ayolon, and was duly transmitted to the Rabbi. Fabi and Bath-Shua were to be married after the ceremony of the divorce was performed by the Rabbi. Unfortunately, the Rabbi<sup>1</sup> discovered that the name Hillel (הילל) in the Get was spelled without a Yod. He declared the Get invalid. Meanwhile the news arrived that the vessel on which Hillel sailed for America foundered in the ocean, and all on board were lost. Since, according to Rabbinical law, *מים שאין להם סוף אשתו אסורה*, the poor woman was left a grass-widow (ענונה) all her life.

Such is the simple plot of the poem, but how vividly and touchingly it is told! The whole sad life of the Jewish woman of that time is passed in panoramic view before us. The poet begins to describe the Jewish woman in the pathetic lines:—

אך חיי העברית עברות נצחת  
 מחנותה לא תצא אנה ואנה:  
 תהרין תלדי, תיניקי, תגמולי,  
 תאפי, ותבשלי, ובלא עת תבולי.

<sup>1</sup> The prototype of *יסקף הכורי* (Stern) Rabbi of Shavli, in the government of Kovno. If this be so, Gordon did this great scholar a lasting wrong. Rabbi Stern, as far as I could learn from men who knew him well, was inclined to interpret Rabbinical laws in a liberal spirit. Moreover, he ever refused, on principle, to issue bills of divorce, fearing to take the responsibility on himself, and his attitude towards the question of divorce was so well known, that all such cases had to be referred to Rabbis of other cities. Hence the incident described in *יד יד* cannot truthfully be ascribed to him, and Gordon's characterization of him is entirely unwarranted.



Eternal bondage is the Jewess's life:  
 Her shop she tends incessant day by day;  
 A mother she—she nurses and she weans,  
 And bakes and cooks and quickly fades away.

(vol. IV, p. 5.)

For not only was she socially man's inferior, but—

גם טל השמים לך לא אצלו:  
 להם, צרי עין, תריג מִצֹּת מנו  
 ולך העלובה רק שלש נתנו.

E'en heaven's dew they kept from thee:  
 Of all religious laws they heed  
 To thee the niggards gave but three.

She is given away in marriage without her consent, dis-  
 regarding all feelings of love she may have, for—

אהבה מן הוא לא ידעו אמותינו,  
 חכונה נעשה את אחותנו? <sup>1</sup>

Love? Our mothers never knew it!

and—

הארמים הם כי פי נערה ישאלו? <sup>2</sup>

Arameans they, the maiden to consult?

The poet next describes Bath-Shua's beauty and accom-  
 plishments; her engagement to Hillel, who had nothing to  
 recommend him but his Talmudic scholarship—

לו עיני ענל, לו פאות כונבות,  
 לו פנים כפני גרוגרות רבי צדוק,  
 אך עלוי הוא בקי בשלש בבות . . .

His eyes were calf-like, and his locks like tails,  
 His face all shrivelled—a Rabbi Zadok's fig <sup>3</sup>,  
 But he is versed in deep Rabbinic lore.

with which she must have been satisfied, for she never said  
 a word—

ומי יאמין לרברי הנשים המפללות  
 האומרים כי בת-שוע בוכה בלילות?

<sup>1</sup> I do not care to translate this line.

<sup>2</sup> A reference to Gen. xxiv. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Referring to *Gilpin*, 59 a.

And can the gossips tell aright  
Who claim Bath-Shua weeps at night?

her marriage and subsequent life with him; his departure for lands unknown; her acquaintance with Fabi; the divorce; Rabbi הכוזרי ופסי, so called, not because he was a descendant of Tartars, but—

נשמת רב ופסי ודאי תַּתִּירית :

Rabbi Vofsi's was a Tartar soul, indeed.

the tragic scene when the divorce was declared invalid, and the subsequent misery of Bath-Shua, who summarizes her misfortune in the phrase:—

אך קוצו של יוד הוא הרגני . . .

A letter's dot has proved my ruin.

The poem is in many places sarcastic, but the heart of the poet goes out to his people who do not realize the full extent of their misery:—

חרבן העיר אלפי שנים נזכרה  
ולחרבן האָמָה נקשיה לבנו :

ובקול בלי החרם ביום החפה נשבורה

לא נשמע צעקת בנינו אחרינו . . . (כל שירי, ח"ד, p. 18)

The City's fall we constantly recall,  
The nation's fall as constantly ignore;  
The sound of glass beneath the Hupah broken,  
Echoes the misery of our children's cries<sup>1</sup>. (vol. IV, p. 18.)

Pity the poet who sees and describes such scenes!

The poem has its shortcomings too. The picture of Bath-Shua is on the one hand overdrawn, and on the other indefinite. Nor does the poet enter deeply into the inner psychology of his heroes and heroines. But

<sup>1</sup> Lilienblum, who persists in interpreting Gordon literally, remarks on the line חרבן העיר אלפי שנים נזכרה, "In my opinion one who writes such a line is not a national poet." (כליץ אחר בני אלה) (p. 27.) Lilienblum evidently does not understand the difference between an exclamation of grief and a positive statement of indifference, or he would have felt with Gordon.

on the whole *קצו של יור* is the most realistic and impressive poem ever written in Hebrew.

*שומרת יבם* (*Waiting for a Brother-in-law*) is less vigorous and realistic, though pathetic and impressive. The avowed purpose of the poem is to hold up to scorn the institution of Levirate marriage, which is a mere formality and yet practised to the discomfort and often the ruin of the unhappy widow—and accidentally to ridicule the greedy “enlightened Rabbis” graduates of the Russian Rabbinical Seminaries. A young man who has lived happily with his wife for three years is lying on his deathbed, watched day and night by his faithful wife, for—

כי בת ישראל היא, יודעת חובתה . . .

A Jewish daughter she—her duty knows—

The couple are childless, and to aggravate the misery of the woman who is about to become a widow, a son was born to her mother-in-law a short time ago. To obviate the necessity of the young woman's waiting for the child to grow up in order to give her *Ḥalitza*, the dying husband is delicately requested by his mother to divorce his wife before his death. He consents. The “enlightened Rabbi” is sent for to perform the ceremony. He is a practical man; he knows “two hundred are more than one hundred,” and insists upon demanding two hundred roubles for his services. The dying man's parents beg him to take one hundred, all their fortune having been spent in a vain effort to save their son. The Rabbi insists upon two hundred: but while they are haggling—

המות, המוב מאד “שלח את יונה

ויעשהו חפשי מרגו ומדנים

חפשי מן המצות ומן הרבנים.

“Kind Death” set Jonah free  
From bickering and strife,  
From Rabbis and from laws.

and the unhappy widow was left to wait for her infant brother-in-law's Halitzah.

It must be acknowledged that the Rabbi pictured in the poem is not only unnatural, but impossible, and that the entire episode does not present a scene from real life. It is rather a criticism of the institution of Halitzah, carried to its extreme logical conclusion. The poet intends to show what havoc such an effete institution might cause under favourable circumstances. After all, while the Rabbi is impossible, many women were actually ruined in similar cases when the husband died without divorcing his wife—and against such actualities the poem was directed. The Rabbi might have been omitted without injuring the poem; on the contrary such omission would have strengthened the impression. Possibly Gordon had a special so-called "enlightened Rabbi" in view against whom he directed the last stanza. This poem was written in 1879 in St. Petersburg, after his return from exile. Does he refer to the Rabbi by whose partisans he was denounced and thrown into prison? The fact that he selected an "enlightened Rabbi" instead of an every-day orthodox one whom he usually criticizes, would lend colour to such a supposition<sup>1</sup>.

אשקא דרספא (*A Wagon's Axle*) written in 1867, is a tragi-comedy of the real Jewish life of his time; and, as in the poems referred to above, presents the Rabbi in an unfavourable light. Eliphelet, a coachman, sits down with his wife and children to the Seder, on the first night of Passover,

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Brainin criticizes this poem for its lack of psychological description. He says (*Hashiloah*, vol. I, pp. 333-4), "We do not know the woman; we only see her shadow . . . she does not say a word throughout the whole poem. What are her feelings? Gordon is silent about that." This is unjust. The poem is not intended as a psychological study in the first place. The woman, as described by the poet, is overwhelmed with grief—and a person in such a state of mind is not given to much talking. Mr. Brainin is also unfair in saying that the poem was written only for the sarcasm against the Rabbi. Gordon has a higher object, which is embodied in the line ? חרתי חרתי (vol. IV, p. 47).

and after skimming through the Hagadah, prepares himself for the sumptuous meal with pleasant anticipations. Suddenly a cry of anguish rings out from the kitchen, and Sarah, his wife, announces the terrible news that "a grain has been found in the soup!" She was making ready to go to the Rabbi, but her husband threatened her with his fist and she desisted. He had worked so hard all winter in order to prepare for the Passover, and now all his labour was to be destroyed in an instant! Sarah did not touch the food; her husband and the children ate it, but the joy of the holiday was gone. On the next day Sarah found another grain in the pot. She could no longer bear "the weight of two grains," and she hastened to consult the Rabbi who, by the single word "Leaven" destroyed all her hopes, and prohibited the use both of the food and the dishes. The poor woman was afraid to go home, thinking of the threats of violence made by her husband the night before. The Rabbi sent two public officers<sup>1</sup> to arrest Eliphelet, and fined him. But henceforth the peace of the family was broken. Eliphelet mistreated his wife for a time and then divorced her.

Trivial and incomprehensible as such incidents may seem to men of modern days, they formed part of the tragedy of Russian Ghetto life in the days of Nicholas I. The poet does not tell it in a mock-heroic fashion; he describes it with all the feeling and pathos of a tragedy. Thinking of the Seder, and of the stereotyped answer in response to the "four questions" the poet reflects:—

עבדים היינו . . . ומה אנחנו עתה?  
 האם לא נרד שנה שנה מטה מטה?  
 האם לא עד היום אסרנו בכבלים  
 המה חבלי השוא, מוסר הבליים?

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Consistories, during the time of Nicholas I and the early days of Alexander II, had police-powers given them within their own jurisdiction.

We *have been* slaves—alas! What are we now?  
 Do we not fall and sink, year in, year out?  
 Are we not fettered still, are we not bound  
 By superstition's shackles strong and stout?

And how vividly we see the Seder:—

אך ברוך השם הכל נעשה יפה,  
 יינו יתאדם, מצותיו מעשה אופה,  
 כל זוויות הבית נקיות וטהורות,  
 נרות המערכה יאירו במנרות;  
 ילדיו לשלחן מסביב כשתילי זית,  
 אשתו טובת לב עוסקת בירכתי הבית;  
 והוא לבוש בדים, עוטה לכָּנים  
 ובלב שמח ובצהלת פנים  
 יספר לילדיו נסי יציאת מצרים;  
 אף יבטיחם כי חיש אליהו יופיע  
 (p. 52, כל שירי, ח"ר, לשנתות אתם יין מן הגביע)

Thank God! all is prepared; the wine is red;  
 Inviting looks the round unleavened bread;  
 From floor to ceiling all is clean and bright;  
 The candles shed profuse a mellow light;  
 The children 'round the board; and full of cheer  
 The pious wife attends now there, now here;  
 And he, arrayed in linen tunic white  
 Of heart content, of countenance all bright,  
 Out of the pictured old Hagadah reads  
 The plagues, the exodus, God's wondrous deeds;  
 Asserts that soon Elijah the divine  
 Shall come to drink with them his cup of wine.

What a picture, indeed, of Jewish idealism. Unfortunately everything was soon changed after the terrible discovery of the grain in the soup. Eliphelet did not finish the Hagadah, and—

לא ראה כי זו הכסתות ממקומן,  
 כי נגנב מתחתן האפיקומן;  
 על כתלי הבית הצללים נמיו,  
 מלאכי שלום במסתרים יבכיו,

גם פשתי הנרות במנורותן כהו,  
הדלת נפתחה—אך לא בא אליהו . . .

To guard the Aphikoman he forgot;  
The pillows stirred, 'twas gone, he saw it not;  
Along the walls fantastic shadows crept,  
And secretly the peaceful angels wept.  
Slowly died the candle's flickering flame;  
The door was opened—no Elijah came.

Eliphelet avenged himself on Sarah for going to consult the Rabbi:—

<sup>1</sup> ואלפלט פקר את שרה כאשר אמר  
ויעש אלפלט לשרה כאשר דבר;

He visited Sarah as he had said,  
And did unto Sarah as he had spoken.

and after the divorce was not Sarah justified in wailing:—

אשקא דרספך חרב ביתך  
ושני גרעיני שעורים החרובו נני . . .

A wagon's axle settled Bethar's doom,  
Two barley grains destroyed my home!

Such is the tragedy as seen from the satirist's exaggerated point of view. Yet in the heart of the old-fashioned Jew such things were part of joyous service and brought no pangs.

ושמחה בחגך (*Rejoice on thy Festival*) is another instance taken by the poet to show the inconveniences a strict adherence to Rabbinical laws may cause. Rabbi Kalman, a Jew from the Pale who did business in Moscow far away from his home, is informed by his wife that a good match has been proposed for their daughter, that a meeting had been agreed on for the intended bride and groom and his parents and friends for the second day of Succoth, and she requested him to come home for the joyful occasion. Rabbi Kalman in-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gen. xxi. 1.

formed his wife that he would arrive home on the seventh day of Succoth, and started out from Moscow. The journey was long and tedious, for it was in ante-railway days. The poor man tried his best to arrive home for the holidays, in fact he had reached within three miles of his home, when the shadows of the night told him that the holiday was begun. Unwilling to travel the short distance on a holiday, Rabbi Kalman was forced to stop over in the village so near his home. He reached home early on the morning after the holidays only to find his wife and his daughter sick with disappointment, for the groom and his party had left, disgusted with the unnecessary delay on the part of the bride's father.

The poet purposely exaggerated in order to show the inconvenience of the Rabbinical law of תחומין (*Limits*). The moral is shown in—

הוי תחום שבת! כמה יגון ואנחה  
(p. 69.) . . . הבאת פתאום על זאת המשפחה

Two thousand paces! how much woe and grief  
They sudden brought unto this family . . .

and in—

לולא נחוך מוריך בעמוד הענן  
לא נמנעת לשוב משחשכה הביתה;  
כי שמחת החג מצוה מדאוריתא  
ותחומין אינן אלא מדרבנן . . .

Had not your teachers led you with a pillar of cloud, you would not have refrained from returning home after dark: for to rejoice on a festival is a Biblical law, whereas the law of "Limits" is only Rabbinic.

To Rabbi Kalman, however, the Rabbinical ordinances were equally binding and he fell a martyr to them. Myriads of Jews have obeyed these laws, however, without any of the tragic consequences which Gordon draws from them.

The last poem of the series, שני יוסף בן שמעון (*Two Josephs ben Simeon*), surpasses by far in its pathos, realism,



and depth of feeling any poem in the Hebrew language. It is a terrible arraignment of the Jewish Consistorial boards during the reign of Nicholas ; and shows at the same time the attitude of the masses towards the Maskilim, the men of the newer school. Joseph ben Simon was a child-prodigy. At thirteen he was already famous for his knowledge and acumen in the Talmud, and he was looked upon as the future light of Israel—in its Rabbinical sense. But Joseph soon realized the futility of a study of the Talmud only, and secretly he began to indulge in secular studies also, to the consternation of his admirers. His father attempted to dissuade him from his course ; but Joseph maintained that the study of the sciences was not subversive of Judaism. He soon left his native town and went to Padua to study medicine. In the same town there was another boy of Joseph's age, Uri, the son of Jochanan the shoemaker. He was a wild lad, never cared to study, though his father tried hard to make a Rabbi out of him. At the age of nineteen he had already become the terror of the town. He took to horse-dealing, and engaged in questionable undertakings. Upon being rebuked by his honest father he left home and disappeared.

Rabbi Shamgar, the head of the Consistory, now appears on the scene. The board-rooms are described, with Rabbi Shamgar sitting in judgment. It was the time of conscription ; the board is busy selecting recruits taken mostly from the ranks of the poor ; the rich bought exemptions for their sons. One woman complains of the abduction of her only son for military service ; but Rabbi Shamgar finds that she belongs to the family of a man who has four sons, and since his sons were scholars, her only son has to be the scapegoat. Other people come on business to get passports and similar things, and every one is attended to in accordance with the bribe he offers. Finally, a rough-looking, stout, but well-dressed young man appears and asks for a passport. He was Uri, the shoemaker's son. He spoke haughtily and impudently. He has to go abroad for

"business." and must have a passport. "But," objects Shamgar, "you are a hidden one<sup>1</sup>." In response the applicant drew a hundred rouble note from his pocket. The argument was convincing enough. Rabbi Shamgar knitted his brow, thought hard for a few minutes; then his face lighted up: he discovered a way out of the difficulty. "Some three years ago," he said, "a young man of your age disappeared, and nobody knows his whereabouts. I will therefore issue a passport; only you have to assume his name." Uri readily consented; he paid the money, and left a new man, for he was now Joseph ben Simon. Rabbi Shamgar went to the synagogue to recite the afternoon prayer.

Meanwhile, the real Joseph ben Simon was studying diligently in Padua not only medicine but also Jewish branches. He was an idealist. Medicine was to afford him his livelihood; for the rest he would preach and teach a more enlightened Judaism, a Judaism more in harmony with philosophy. After suffering hardships and privations for five years, he reached his goal; he became a doctor of medicine and philosophy. He hesitated about returning to his native land. But the thought that the people there needed him most, and the news that his mother was sick, banished all hesitation. With his documents and his old passport in his pocket, he started home.

The train roared and puffed, and Joseph, tired and

<sup>1</sup> Many fathers, to save their sons from military conscription under Nicholas (the length of service being twenty-five years) refused to enroll their male children in the official registers at their birth. These were called "hidden ones" (נעלים in Hebrew). Officially, these were non-existent. As such proceedings were, of course, illegal, such hidden ones were always at the mercy of the professional informers who constantly demanded black-mail in lieu of their silence; and they suffered the further disadvantage of being unable to obtain a passport legally. As a passport is absolutely essential to freedom of movement in Russia, the hidden ones were forced to apply to the Consistorial boards for such documents. The latter often issued fraudulent passports either in the names of the dead or absentees, for a money consideration of course, and thus caused such tragedies as described in the poem.

weary, fell asleep. In his dreams he saw himself as a Rabbi instituting various reforms to lighten the life of his people, and a smile of satisfaction played on his lips when he heard the blessings showered upon him by his congregants. He awoke with pleasant emotions, but fell asleep again. An unpleasant dream came to torment him. He saw himself in Purgatory, where all who ridiculed the Rabbis were punished. Among them he finds Elisha ben Abuyah, Acosta, Spinoza, various Jewish Maskilim, such as Levinsohn, Shatzkes, Erter, and Lebensohn; and he heard a voice proclaiming his own doom. He awoke with a start. Meanwhile the train was rushing on. A little more puffing and roaring of the engine and Joseph found himself on Russian soil. Officers demanded passports; Joseph showed his and trembled at the impression his name made on the officer. He thought it was because his passport was out of date, and declared himself ready to pay the prescribed fine. The officer, however, arrested him on the charge of murder. His fellow passengers could hardly realize that their quiet, apparently naïve, fellow traveller, whom they thought to be a doctor, was a murderer! In prison Joseph was told that some months ago a horse-dealer tried to smuggle a drove of horses across the boundary line. The officers overtook him; a fight ensued, and in the *mélée* that followed one officer was killed by the desperate smuggler. He himself escaped, but among his effects left behind him his passport was found, and the description and name tallied with that of the present prisoner. In vain Joseph protested that he never dealt in horses, and that he had been out of Russia these five years. He was kept in prison for some time, and then in company with other criminals he was driven on foot to his native town for trial. The convoy upon arrival there met a funeral procession. The soldiers, according to law, presented arms in honour of the dead. Joseph recognized his father as the chief mourner, and wanted to throw himself on the bier; but the soldiers gruffly

forced him back into the line of march. Joseph was found guilty because the Consistorial authorities, especially Rabbi Shamgar, deposed that there was only one Joseph ben Simon in the town, who had already long ago acquired a bad reputation as a heretic. There was nobody to take Joseph's part since he was considered a heretic. He was sentenced to hard labour. Rabbi Shamgar continued as the head of the Consistory.

The poem begins with a scathingly sarcastic enumeration of the powers of Rabbi Shamgar, who is described in all divine attributes, for he, too, by doctoring the official registers, changed men into women, young into old, gave childless parents a half-dozen sons, and vice versa. These miracles, however, happen to the rich only, who have to pay for it.

Joseph's youth is described:—

בן שש קרא דף גמרא עם רשי  
בן שבע תרץ בתוספות כל קשיא  
בן שמונה כל ודוק לא עממוהו . . .

The Talmud he read at six,  
The Tosaphists at seven,  
And casuistry at eight.

At thirteen he was already a Talmudist:—

אם התלמוד ים—יוסף הליתן

In the Talmudic sea  
The leviathan was he,

and every rich man who had a daughter of marriageable age:—

חשב מזמות למשוך ליתן אליה . . .

Schemed to bait the leviathan.

A realistic description of the synagogue-court is next given (Canto iv); it is so realistic in fact that we do not care to see it. Brainin says (*Hashiloah*, vol. I, p. 339) that such verses would not be written by a poet in any

other language. Perhaps; but then no other people presents such a sight. Gordon's picture is, however, undoubtedly overdrawn.

The poet takes occasion in Canto v to apostrophize the extraordinary desire for study, characteristic of Jewish boys:—

מה עצמת, מה גברת תשוקת הרעת  
בלבב נערי ישראל, זה עם תולעת!  
אש תמיד על המזבח בוערת

. . . . .

How strong art thou, all conquering desire  
To know! in youthful Jewish minds ingrained;  
Upon the shrine thou art the constant fire . . .

עמדו על דרכי מיר, אישישוק, וולוון,  
(p. 101.) וראו בחורי עני הולכים בחפזון,

. . . . .

אנה הם עולים? לישון על הארץ,  
לחיות חיי צער, לשאת כל קרץ—  
וזאת התורה, אדם כי ימות באהל . . .

Upon the roads to Jewish schools that lead,  
Behold poor youngsters hastening with all speed.

. . . . .

And what awaits them there? A life of need  
And misery, the cold bare floor their bed—  
Such is the Law—and what if one fall dead!

And again, speaking of the Russians who glory in their Lomonosoff—a self-made poet:—

כמה למנסף ברחוב היהודים:

How many Lomonosoffs in the Pale?

It is interesting to notice in Canto vi that all the reforms Joseph, or rather Gordon, would like to see instituted are of such a character that they would not in the least infringe upon even Rabbinical Judaism, and yet would lift a burden from off the shoulders of the people.

Even for advocating such trifling reforms Joseph was looked upon as a heretic!

The death and funeral of Joseph's mother are drawn by the hands of a master, and touch us to the heart with their genuine pathos. Especially vivid are the lines:—

והנה קול חרדה ברחוב הקריה  
קול איסתרא בלגינא קיש קיש קריא,  
וקול הקורא צדקה תציל ממות!  
הכסים נפתחו, החנויות סגרו  
נשמעו אנחות, ודמעות נגרו,  
על אדם כשר כל דמעה נחשבת . . .

From down the street there comes a rattling din  
Of pennies jingling in a box of tin,  
With "Charity from death saves" the refrain;  
The purses open, shut the shops remain,  
And sighs escape, and tears profuse are shed:  
They count the tears that flow for righteous dead.

But how terrible was the meeting of the two processions:—

ובעור מעבר מזה הלוייה עוברת,  
בא מעבר מזה לוייה אחרת . . .

While passed the mourners' train with solemn tread,  
Another column down the road was led.

and at this very moment:—

נראה לי אמר השמש המושך בקרון  
כאלו הבר-מן רגז בארון,  
לבי נוקפי שמא עורנה חיה . . .

"Methinks," the sexton said, "the body stirred  
And trembling shook as though it were alive."

Vain fright!

We are shocked at seeing Shamgar's hypocrisy, who after issuing the false passport and having received the bribe:—

—טמן "המאה" בצלחת  
ויצא להתפלל מנחה בעשרה.

The "Hundred" in his pocket stored away,  
And went into the Synagogue—to pray. (p. 96.)

But how ironical and pathetic are the lines:—

ונדיבי העם רחמנים בני רחמנים  
הגישו לו מנחה ומתת בסבר פנים—  
סדר תפלה קטן ושני זוגות תפלין !

. . . . . The pious souls  
Presented him (Joseph), with kind and gracious look,  
Phylacteries and a little Prayer Book.

Indeed, what other comfort could the unhappy Joseph find? . . .

In his *l'envoi* אל יאשם יהודה (*Blame not Judah*) the poet acknowledges that the pictures he had drawn were not at all agreeable, nay more:—

גם לבי יכאב, גם נפשי לי מרה  
(p. 132.) על מעשה ידי הטובעים בים צרה,

My own soul also bleeds, and heavy is my heart,  
At my creations sinking in a sea of woe.

but he excuses himself in the lines:—

ומה אעשה אם אחי היהודים  
יראוני רק שמות, רק עני ומרודים:  
ובבל פנות העם, ממסד עד הטפחות  
רק דמעות נגרות, ובכי ואנחות ?

Am I to blame if the life of brother Jews  
Reflect but gloomy, darkly coloured hues;  
And that in every station, high or low,  
I hear but moans, and see the tears that flow ?

In a letter of Oct. 27, 1876 (*Letters*, vol. I, p. 210), he says: "Perhaps my poem אשקא דרספק will bring it about that in the holes wherein Jews hide themselves, a family shall not be ruined because of a 'suspicion of Heaven'; perhaps ישמחה בחנק will show the simple-minded Rabbi Kalman or his likes the foolishness of distressing himself un-

necessarily in order to fulfil the commandment, 'Thou shalt rejoice on thy holidays'; perhaps ברבורים אכוסים (*Stuffed Turkeys*), will stir up the Rabbis to relax the rigor of the dietary laws; perhaps קוצו של יוד which I wrote with blood and tears, shall save some Jewish woman in the future from life-long ruin through the ignorance of the Rabbinical writers of grammar and the Bible; perhaps שני יוסף בן שמעון will prevent a Jewish publican from issuing a false passport." And who shall say that his poems did not have the desired effect, did not open the eyes of hundreds and thousands of his readers? Mr. Brainin may be right in saying (*Hashiloah*, vol. I, pp. 336-71) that there is nothing new in what Gordon says about the Rabbis. But a poet need not always proclaim something new like Mr. Brainin's ideal poet, who "sees from one end of the world to the other." Gordon, by giving popular ideas a poetic garb makes them more striking, more impressive. Had Gordon followed Brainin's suggestion as to what a poet should be, he would be unknown to-day, and could do nothing towards the awakening of his people. Fortunately Gordon knew his people better; he knew what would impress them; what would appeal to them. Hence his fame, hence his success, hence the good he helped to accomplish. Nor is Smolensky right in saying that his "Epics of the Present" are only of temporary value (*Hashahar*, vol. X, p. 462). Many generations will come and pass before the reforms advocated by Gordon shall be brought into realization. While those misuses of Judaism endure, these poems cannot fail to be of value. And when the golden days of true reform shall have come, these poems will be read with renewed interest, because they will be recognized as having contributed a great deal towards making the era of reform a possibility.

But in justice to the memory of Gordon and to himself, the present writer finds it necessary to make the following statement:—

In his review of that portion of Gordon's work dealing



with Rabbis and Rabbinical institutions, the writer may have used expressions conveying a sense of disrespect for and disparagement of Rabbinic Judaism. Such were not the writer's intentions, nor are those his views; but, in interpreting another man's thoughts, the reviewer, if he be fair, must of necessity reproduce that man's thought as he understands it—only this and nothing more. But—this is more important—Gordon himself was not always the iconoclast he shows himself to be in the above-quoted poems. He was not a radical in its sinister sense—destroying, tearing down. He even acknowledged the justice of the opposition. In an undated letter (*Letters*, II, p. 438) he says: "After all, the complaints of the ultra-orthodox against the Haskalah and the Maskilim are not without ground. . . . To our sorrow we must realize that the culture we are striving after will make us drink gall and produce thistles instead of flowers. We lament not because of the customs neglected, or the 'fences' broken down, or the burden of practices and observances thrown off; but because the unruly waters have reached to the very soul of our religion; and a keen sword lies at the very throat of our faith and its existence. A true Haskalah like that of Saadjah, Maimonides, and Mendelssohn is very scarce among us; an imaginary, destructive Haskalah prevails. The Maskilim have taken the shell of civilization and dressed themselves in it for appearance's sake; but the kernel they have thrown away. They combine the unpleasant traits of the places they left and of those whither they came; they are not particular about religious commandments, and have no scruples in adopting even those practices which have given Israel such an unenviable reputation among the Gentiles. The Maskilim of the better sort may be truly educated men—but they are traitors and are ashamed of their own race." Are not these the sentiments of a truly religious Jew—nay, of a conservative even? Only, it must be borne in mind that when Gordon wrote his epics the Haskalah was young, and its champions, in the first

flush of enthusiasm, went to extremes, and Gordon with them. But, when the crucial moment arrived, the moment of choosing between a cultured Judaism and a culture without Judaism, we find Gordon on the side of Judaism.

## II.

### *Lyric Poems.*

As a lyric poet Gordon shows his powers only when expressing his feelings with relation to his people. His poems of nature are beautiful more because of the language than of the contents. The poems *הל אביב* (*Spring*) and *חג לאדני* (*The Lord's Feast*) are didactic rather than descriptive. The gist of the former is: every feeling man is bound in love to nature and to God. The revival in nature symbolizes to him resurrection and immortality. He philosophizes as to the origin of nature, sings praises to God, and encourages man not to fear death. As a rule, nature descriptions are not Gordon's strong point. Of his twelve sonnets in vol. I, only the eleventh and twelfth are Jewish; the poet bewails in them the death of two Russian Jewish periodicals, *Dawn* and *Zion*. The rest are rich in rhetoric and mild satire, but lack in feeling and in depth. In his translation of Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, and of some of Schiller, he shows himself the master of the Hebrew language that he was, the translation appearing like original poems. Gordon, the poet, revealed himself in his Jewish lyrics, for his heart is bound up with that of the people.

A poet, subject to various moods, he is swayed alternately by feelings of joy and despair. He had dedicated himself to the Hebrew muse from his earliest youth, as stated above:—

אני בימי חרפי, עת עוד על מצח  
לא הרב טל ילדות, נדר נדרתי:  
עבר לעברית אנכי עד נצח  
לה כל חושי בי לצמיתות מכרתי.

In early childhood, ere from my brow  
 The dew of youth was dried, a vow I vowed.  
 The Hebrew tongue's eternal slave am I.  
 My life with hers fore'er be interwoven!

He sings because he cannot help singing, like the German poet's

Wenn ich nicht sinnen und dichten soll,  
 So ist das Leben mir kein Leben mehr.

So Gordon :—

נפשי לא אחליף, טבעי לא אמיר,  
 כן אלי בראני ולזאת נוצרתי :  
 רוח אדני בי, ופקודתו שמרתי,  
 עוד אוסיף לשיר כאשר שוררתי . . .

My soul and character I cannot change,  
 Thus God created me, thus I remain ;  
 The muses stir me, and I must obey ;  
 As I have sung I will yet sing again. (vol. I, p. xxii.)

He calls upon his people to arise from their lethargy :—

הקיצה עמי, עד מתי תישנה  
 הן גז הליל השמש האירה . . .  
 . . . . .  
 ארץ עדן זאת הן לך תפתח  
 בניה „אחינר“ לך יקראון עתה.

Arise, my people, sleep no more,  
 The night is fled, behold the dawn. (ibid., p. 44.)

This Eden land with open arms awaits thee,  
 Her sons shall henceforth as a brother hail thee. (ibid.)

Alas, it proved otherwise ; but the signs of the times in 1863 looked so favourable ; all that seemed necessary was to be

היה אדם בצאתך, ויהורי באחליך :

At home a Jew, without a man. (ibid., p. 45.)

He refutes the imputation that the Jews are incapacitated for knowledge and education ; and he appeals to his brethren :—

כל עת חייכם לחכמה הקדישו.

To knowledge give your life.

But the poet does not always find himself in the happy mood of hopefulness. From the height of the heavens, whither he was carried on the wings of his fancy, he sees a panoramic view of the condition of his people. He beholds the pillars of Judaism trembling on the point of collapse, and the youth escaping through the windows; the dingy

חדר המלמדים שחמי בני הנעורים,

Heder (School-room) where the youth are slaughtered,

young men sinking in the "Sea of the Talmud"; the blind old man who is

רב מברך את עמו בהמרא חדשה,

A rabbi blessing his people with a new rigorous interpretation;

the heads of the Consistories emptying the pockets of the people; the confusion of ideas and ideals, one not understanding the other; and, above all, a flock, the עדר אדני (*The Lord's Flock*) without pasture; its wool sheared and led by blind goats . . . he realizes

כי גם במרום יכבדו עשירים,

That even on high the rich are respected;

he sees also a tablet with letters erased representing his own youthful ideas, and he can no longer contain himself:—

אהה . . .

מכל חלומותי לא נשאר מאומה,

מהרת הקדש, השכלת רבני,

ישוב הארץ, ותקומת האומה . . .

Alas!

Of all my dreams not one has come to pass  
Purification, education,  
Jewish national restoration.

and he falls from heaven to earth בירה בלילה (*On the Moon at Night*). The same undercurrent of despair runs through the poem למי אני עמל (*Whom do I strive for?*). A vague consciousness of the futility of his work steals upon him. Who will understand him; who will appreciate him? The old generation looks with suspicion upon poetry and the poet:—

מות בשיר<sup>1</sup>, אפיקורסות במליצה,  
אסור עם המשורר לדור במחיצה

There's death in song—in rhetoric heresy,  
One must not with a poet share his roof—

the tender daughters of Zion are not given a Hebrew education, for

בת תלמוד תורה תפלות לוֹמֶרֶת

A woman's Torah—'tis apostasy,

the new generation has gone to the opposite extreme, and

הנם הולכים קדימה שנה שנה  
מי ידע הנבול, עד מתי, עד אנה,  
אולי עד מקום משם לא ישובו . . .

With rapid strides they rush ahead,  
And who can tell how long, how far?  
Perchance whence there is no return . . .

For whom then does he sing? He consoles himself with the thought that there is still left "one in a city; two in a province" who do not ridicule the songs of Zion. For these he sings; they will understand him; them he embraces with tears and exclaims:—

הוי! מי יחוש עתידות, מי זה יודיעני  
אם לא האחרון במשוררי ציון הנני  
(p. 104.) אם לא גם אתם הקוראים האחרונים?

Alas! who can divine, who can assure  
That I am not the last of Zion's bards,  
That you who read are not the last who read.

<sup>1</sup> A pun on מות בסיר, 2 Kings iv. 40.

Such feelings of despair cling to him continually. Even in the midst of a satirical poem he cannot forget the misfortunes of his people, and a cry of anguish escapes him. The poet holds his pen in his hand. What shall the theme of his poem be (מפה זו מה תהי עליה)? Various subjects suggest themselves to him, and one of these is:—

אולי שמימה אזורק טפתי  
ותהי למטר גשם ותתך דמעתי  
על שבר בת עמי הגדול מים?

Shall I this ink-drop towards heaven throw  
Into a flood to turn, and drown my tears  
Upon my people's ocean depth of woe?

Fortunately the ink-drop on his pen dries up . . . but not his despair. What are we? he asks in עדר אדני (*The Lord's Flock*); a nation, a people, a race, a community? Seeing the various ways in which the Jews are exploited by their oppressors, who "skin our hide, shear our wool, and lead us in a wilderness where there is no pasture," he comes to the conclusion:—

לא עם, לא עדה אנחנו, רק—עדר.

Not a people nor community  
Are we; we are—a flock.

Thus also in סלוק שכינה (*Departure of the Shechinah*). The Shechinah departs because it can no longer see the cruelties and injustice rampant in the "vale of tears"; it stops a few minutes with the poet and whispers to him:—

זר לי עליך המשורר בן אוני,  
גם אתה, ידעתי, חלית כמוני;  
נרדך יבאש פה מצחנה ורפש,  
ומרחב יה אין לך להלך הנפש . . .

My sympathies to thee, unhappy bard,  
My fellow sufferer, like me as grieved;  
Thy bloom evaporates for lack of air,  
Thy soul is stunted for the lack of space.

For what is the fate of the poet, after all ?

צר לי, בעל החלומות, צר לי עליך  
ממרורים תשבע כל חיי הבלך :  
תישן, תראה חלום, רגע תנוח,  
תיקץ, תראה שברו—שבר ברוח . . .

Alas, for thee, O thou who dreamest dreams,  
Thy life is one long chain of bitterness ;  
Thou sleepest, dreamest—momentary peace—  
How breaks thy heart at the awakening !

(vol. I, pp. 113-14.)

How, then, can the poet sing of joy and happiness ? “ In my youth,” he says in בעלות השחר (*At Dawn*) (vol. IV, 1-4), “ I used to rise with the dawn, invoke my muse, and sing of love, of friendship and delight, of freedom, and hope and comfort.” But a change came over the vision of his dream. For—

Ere yet the morn in glory rose,  
While yet I tuned my harp's sweet string,  
A change came over me, alas !  
I can but wail—I cannot sing !  
For frightful dreams I saw by night,  
I saw my people—horrid sight !

He saw the lowliness of his people, their numerous bruises, their false friends and evil teachers, sources of their poverty, and his life became embittered :—

No more my joyous strains shall ring ;  
Of freedom, light, I must despair—  
Eternal servitude I sing,  
I dream disgrace, polluted air.  
The rhymes which from my pen-point flow  
Are tear-drops on my nation's woe.  
Henceforth my muse is raven black :  
Each word a curse ; each phrase a dirge !

And with all that, Lilienblum and Mordecai Cohen say that Gordon was not a national poet. Verily the ways of the critic are strange.

The riots of 1881 called forth two poems of Gordon, the one *בנערינו ובוקנינו נלך* (*We will go, both Young and Old*) breathing defiance; the second *אחותי רוחמה* (*Sister Ruḥamah*) consolation. In the former he says:—

עם אחד היינו, עם אחד נהי,  
 כי ממקבת בור אחד נקרנו;  
 יחדיו נחלוקה גם שמחה גם נהי,  
 זה שנים אלפים מעת נפירנו . . .

We were one people, one we shall remain—  
 Out of the self-same well our course was hewn;  
 Both grief and joy we shared them all alike  
 In exile these twenty centuries.

And even though—

הסער מתחולל, יהום הרוח,  
 מים זירונים עד צואר הגיעו,

The storm rages, winds terrific howl,  
 The foaming waves up to the throat have reached,

we will not give up the fight, but—

נחזיק באלהים, דתו אל נעזובה,  
 ושפת קדשו אל השכח מפינו . . .

To God we cling and to his Law—  
 The holy tongue we'll not forget . . .

Yet, if—

אם נמר האל כי עוד נחזיק בפלך  
 בנערינו ובוקנינו נלך.

By God's decree to wander we are doomed,  
 We go both young and old.

In a more passionate and vehement tone the poem *אחותי רוחמה* is one of the strongest and most pathetic of Gordon's lyrics. The dedication is devised by the ingenuity of persons who are not allowed to speak freely; but the symbol is well understood, and is the more



appealing. The poet addresses himself to the daughter of Jacob whom Ben-Hamor has defiled—an allusion to Gen. xxxiv. He begins with words of condolence:—

מה תתיפחי אחותי רוחמה,  
מה נפל לך מה רוחך נפעמה,  
ולחייך שושנים מה נבלו  
אם באו שוודים וכבודך חללו.  
אם גברה האגרוף, יד זדים רמה,  
הבך העון אחותי רוחמה?

Why wailest thou, O sister dear?  
And wherefore do thy spirits droop?  
Thy rosy cheeks why wan and sear?  
Thou wast defiled by a bestial troop!  
If fist prevails, if cowards assault,  
O sister dear, is that thy fault?

After showing to her that she was not at all rendered impure by the bestiality of her assailants since the very blood they spilled will mark them like Cain with the blood of Abel, he finds some melancholy consolation in her dishonour:—

. . . I patient bore  
With aching heart and body sore  
Afflictions, pains which did befall;  
Yet hoped, nor left my land withal—  
But thy disgrace I cannot bear,  
Come hence, come home, O sister dear.

And he ends by saying that since we have neither a house nor a mother, let us go to another inn, let us go to the land where freedom reigns supreme, where no man is ashamed of his nation or of his God<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The solution that Gordon suggests in his poem is evidently emigration to America, and not to Palestine. The following quotation from a letter written to M. Gordon in 1885 will throw some light on Gordon's attitude towards Zionism. In response to Lilienblum's criticism that he did not sufficiently bewail the afflictions of Israel (referring to the riot of 1881), and that he did not sing in honour of Zionism, he says in his letter:

But to return to his personal poems. In *בצאתי מטעלי* (*At my Departure from Telz*), written in 1872, the poet enumerates his exertions on behalf of his people and ends with the self-gratulation:—

ובכן שש שנים את אחי עברתי  
 עתה אצא אין כסף—אך לא חנם :<sup>1</sup>  
 לא לתרו והבל כחי אברתי,  
 עוד יראה פעלי על נכדם על נינם.

And so, six years my brethren have I served,  
 And go without reward ; but not in vain  
 My labours and the duties never swerved :  
 Their children's children through my work will gain.

But in the following poem, *מחלת הזכרון*, his despair steals upon him again. He addresses himself to Purah, Lord of Oblivion, and begs him to cause him to forget his former ideals. In this poem Gordon shows himself iconoclastic.

“The reason I did not write any Jeremiad on the riot was because I did not see any use in it. Have we not enough lamentations? and will lamentations in Hebrew affect our enemies who don't read Hebrew anyhow?

מה נשיף לעברים ? הם עניים ידעו :  
 נשיף לעמים, יחרדו, ישמעו.

Why preach to Jews? They know their misery.  
 Unto the nations preach, and let them hear  
 And tremble . . .

It is false that I am opposed to the ideal of a national resurrection. Like all faithful and loyal Jews I desire to see the salvation of my people ; but I wish this redemption to be complete and not merely to be delivered from the yoke of the nations only to fall beneath a more terrible yoke—that of ignorance. How can a nation exist without civilization? Our fathers escaped from Egypt and took along their silver and gold, but not their darkness and plagues . . . If we are to leave Europe without taking along their civilization, what is the good of leaving at all? It is better to perish in slavery than to lead the supposedly free life of the savage. These are the reasons why I did not write any poems on the recent events. At any rate, silence is not opposition. A secret love is sometimes better than an open one.” (*Letters*, vol. II, pp. 113, 114.)

<sup>1</sup> An allusion to Exod. xxi, 2, 11.

In his youth he awaited every day the arrival of the Messiah—he did not come. He hoped that the Haskalah would prove a blessing—it proved a failure. The Hebrew language used to be his delight, for he thought that—

בחיית השפה ישוב גם עמה לתחיה

The nation revives with its tongue's renaissance,

and, like a lover, he found pleasure in her speech, in her every expression ; even more—

כמקדש היתה לי, כפני אלהים פניה.

She was my altar—nay, my goddess she.

This hope was also doomed to disappointment. If he could only forget his former dreams ; but he feels there is no hope, unless “by means of his epitaph.”

To this appeal Purah suggests drunkenness or charms as an antidote to unpleasant recollections, to which the poet replies :—

אהה עברי אנכי נזיר מני רחם,  
 יין לא ישכח רישי, בשתי לא אנחם ;  
 ואהה משכיל אני, מעמתי מפרי כחש ;  
 בסגולות לא אאמין, לא קסם בי, לא כחש ;  
 אוי, אוי לי, משכיל עברי, אין מזון אל שברי,  
 רפא לא ארפא עד באי אל קברי . . .

I am a Jew, alas, of Naziritic race  
 And cannot find oblivion or mirth in drink—  
 Alas ! I am a man of intellect and think—  
 No confidence in magic formulas I place.  
 Woe unto me, a Jew of intellect possessed !  
 Incurable I am until my final rest. (vol. V, p. 26.)

Again, he exclaims in despair :—

על מה אדברה, אחי, על מה רוחי אביע ?  
 אוי לי אם אחריש, אוי אם קול אשמיע :

What shall I speak of, brother, what announce ?  
 Woe if I speak, woe if I hold my peace. (ibid., p. 36.)

and after such an outburst we may believe with him that—

אולי נשמת הנביא הענתותי  
היא המחיה אותי . . .

The Jeremaic soul perchance  
Within my frame new lodgement found.

In his more calm moods he felt the sweet consciousness of duty well done:—

אני הגבר<sup>1</sup> את חקי השלמתי  
ששת עלי יוצרי, חלקי ממעלה:  
רגע לא נחת, נפשי לא דוממתי,  
עוררתך להבחין בין יום ובין לילה. (vol. V, p. 28.)

I chanticleer, the task performed  
Which from on high fell to my lot:  
Announced the near approach of morn,  
I lusty crowed, and wearied not.

Addressing himself to his pens:—

אתם עמי ערי נגד כל קמי  
כי בתם וביושר ינעתי כל ימי:  
כי כסופר בעמו מלאתי חובתי,  
ומנוחה עד יום אחרון לא מצאתי. (vol. I, p. 123.)

Be ye my witnesses against my foes  
That in all honesty my lines I penned;  
A nation's scribe—my duty I fulfilled,  
And rest nor sought nor found until the end.

Again, in a poem to Dolitzky, he expresses his optimism in the following noble apostrophe:—

אימים החיים, ונורא מותנו . . .  
אך אל שנינו מפניהם נחתה:  
לא עצים יבשים אנכי ואתה,  
ומגלם קהה לבחור עצמנו . . .  
. . . . .

<sup>1</sup> The word גבר is homonymous.

Life is awful—death is dire, . . .  
 Of them we both stand not in dread;  
 We both are not mere barren trunks,  
 Too dull's the axe to strike us dead, . . .

כמוני כמוך אל נא ננחם  
 על חלומות שתחלום ועל אשר חלמתי . . .

Nor you nor I will e'er regret  
 The dreams you may and I did dream.

לא מקדם כזב ראיתי בחלומי,  
 ותרמית עינים גם אתה לא תחזו :  
 לכן אל תירא כמוני משחת,  
 הא לך עטף, עלה רש מקומי ! . . .

'Twas no mirage in dreams I saw,  
 Nor shall false light thine eyes deceive :  
 Like unto me the grave defy,  
 Soon I am gone—my pen receive ! . . .

This poem was written July 14, 1892. Three months later Gordon was no more.

### Conclusion.

The preceding chapters will, it is hoped, have given the reader a comprehensive idea of Gordon as a poet. To quote all the noble passages of Gordon's poems would be to reproduce the six volumes of poetry which he left behind him. We have dwelt somewhat at length upon his Jewish poems, because they, more so than the others, tend to show the true nature of our poet, though his *חנה לאחר שלשים שנה* (*Hannah after Thirty*) and *בית מועד* (*The Cemetery*), which are human and express the *Weltschmerz*, are equally forcible and sympathetic. The latter would, in fact, compare with Gray's *Elegy*. His *Elegy* *הוי אח* (*Oh, Brother !*) on his friend Micah Joseph Lebensohn, written in 1854<sup>1</sup> at the age of twenty-

<sup>1</sup> In his preface to this poem, Gordon describes the state of his mind at the beginning of his career in 1854 :—

“Those were the days before the young grapes ripened ; the days of the

two, in the form of a morality play, is a masterpiece of poetic expression, and shows a mastery of language unequalled in Hebrew literature. Of his 123 fables, 36 of which are original, the translations surpass their originals by their beauty of style and diction, and his original fables are rich in humour, and pithy. His epigrams and Almakams are keen and brilliant. However, as this essay has been somewhat too long already, we can but mention Gordon's other poems *en passant*. To sum up we may say, and with truth, that Gordon stands pre-eminent, in fact unique, in Hebrew literature as a master of language, as a poet, and as a humorist.

Gordon complains of a lack of appreciation on the part of the Hebrew reading public. Thus, in a letter written in 1880 to his bosom friend, Kaplan, he says: "My work in the field of Hebrew literature, and all the honour of the new Jewish literature is vanity. What good is it to me to have written my verses, seeing that nobody appreciates my work? My songs are like the crowing of the cock which only peasants hear and understand. . . . Can I expect praise after death who have been almost forgotten while living? . . ." Again, describing the funeral of Nekrassoff, Russia's national poet, and the honours showered upon him (Dec. 30, 1879), he says<sup>1</sup>: "I also hoped to be a Jewish Nekrassoff; I also hoped to break the Jewish chains by the force of my words and to level the wall which surrounds them, the Chinese wall, by the

fledgling just coming out of its shell. A ray of light broke forth and I saw that the day was approaching for me to go out in the barn and to seek grain for myself; but my feathers had not yet sprouted, and my beak was not yet sharp enough. The walls of the Beth Hamidrash began to totter and I was standing one foot in the four cubit of the Halachah, and the other in the regions of life. When I began to walk with trembling knees, to shift for myself, and there was nobody to help or support my tottering steps, I met Lebensohn, . . . a fledgling like myself, but with grown feathers and a stormy spirit—and he showed me the path to light. Some steps we plodded together, he leading and I following. Alas! he disappeared too soon! . . ." (*Letters*, vol. I, p. 277.)

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

trumpets of poetry (an allusion to Joshua vi. 20). But my people does not understand—therefore I shall not die the death of poets like Nekrassoff; my people will not stone me with poems, nor crown me with flowers; would that they do not crown me with thorns, and do not stone my coffin!”

Fortunately Gordon was not right in thus complaining. These letters must have been written under the impulse of momentary disappointments. It was true that he was greatly chagrined, and the peace of his mind was disturbed by the unfavourable and unjust criticism of M. L. Lilienblum, who was his friend; for he thought that the critic voiced the popular sentiment. But Frishman's brilliant reply, and the polemics of other writers against Lilienblum, should have reassured him. The banquet given in his honour on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his literary labours in 1881, and the numerous letters, dispatches, and poems of congratulation proved that he was still looked upon as the “Lion of the Company.” And when the Lion was dead a cry of sorrow rang out from the hearts of his admirers—and their name is legion—not only throughout Russia, but wherever there was a Jew who read Hebrew, for every one felt that with the death of Gordon, the Haskalah lost one of its most daring champions, and the Hebrew muse its darling child.

No nobler tribute can be bestowed on any poet than that which Gustav Karpeles did on Gordon, and we close with some extract of his article in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, 1892, no. xliii, pp. 506:—

In the Schiller homestead at Weimar a poor young wanderer came once with the question, “Does Schiller live here?” “Yes,” was the reply, “he lived here, but he is long since dead.” “Schiller dead!” The poor lad could not comprehend it. “Can a Schiller die?” I can well imagine that a similar incident may occur to some Jewish youth in the future. Leon Gordon dead! and with these words a world of poetry and fancy is destroyed for thousands of our co-religionists.

“He was a great poet; a pillar of fire of the muses.”

Soft and lovely, pure and bright rang his song when it sang of human

feelings. A ray of the light of love diffused itself through his poetic creations, and gave them a peculiar character. He was not a mere singer of lamentations, but a leader on the path of progress and freedom. His vivid perception of the conquests of the new time expressed itself in his songs, pervaded by a profound grief which moved every feeling heart by the delicacy of lofty sentiment and by the spirit of truth; also the old song of Zion found an echo in his poems.

Poetry with him was not a profession but a holy avocation. Pure honesty and modesty which never offered appearance for life and truth, distinguished him from all his fellows. Whatever he expressed in song—the sorrows and desires of love; longing and satisfaction; grief, resignation, and cheerful reliance—all sprang of the well of pure human sympathy, deep enough to penetrate every one, bright enough to sparkle with variegated opulence. In everything a genuine feeling finds expression; one picture suggests another, but an ardent, sea-deep love for his people is always at the bottom. Gordon's art consisted in that he combined diverse elements of feelings and ideals in an artistic composition, in the shortest space, and by the simplest means. . . . Especially remarkable is the fact that in the desolate tyranny in which he lived, Gordon was a poet of freedom. This nightingale sang also in winter! And, indeed, his song was the tone of the nightingale and the lark; it announced the dawn of a new era to the poor, the oppressed, the deceived."

Dr. Karpeles concludes with a comment on the last line of Gordon's *טפה זו מה תהי עליה* (*A Drop of Ink*), which reads: *עודני חושב ותיבש הטפה* (*While I was thinking, the ink-drop dried*)—

No, my dear Gordon, your pen point was never dry. You had so much to sing and to say about all the misery that met thee! And thousands listened to thy song, and thousands lived with thee in the world of thy songs, which enchanted them like a midsummer night's dream; and thousands will revive and be elevated by the graces of thy song, the music of thy singing, the sound of thy words, and the power of thy feelings. Thy tomb will be set in their souls, and they will remember for ever thy profound feelings, thy noble conceptions, thy staunch faithfulness, thy firm truthfulness, thy pure love, lofty spirit, and, above all, thy genuinely poetic gifts.



## GORDON'S "L'ENVOI."

BUT fifty years and two I lived.  
 Already age is coming fast.  
 My vigour wanes, my eyes are dim,  
 A cloud upon my spirit settles.

The cloud, the shadow 'tis of death!  
 I see him drawing nearer, nearer. . . .  
 My strength gives way at his approach,  
 Behold him aim his arrow at me!

Thy two-edged sword is but a straw!  
 I fear it not; it cannot fright me!  
 I am prepared, O death, to go  
 To-day or whensoever it please thee.

My work is done, within these leaves  
 Unto my people my soul I poured;  
 What matters if my day is done!  
 Or if my frame to ashes turn?

And may it rot, and turn to dust.  
 Within these leaves my soul I bound  
 (For leaves possess vitality)  
 And from oblivion thus preserved it.

Destroy my skin, my flesh, O death,  
 And grind me unto dust and clay  
 (I am but clay—the potter thou),  
 My soul within my books shall live!

And some may joy when I am gone,  
 Some may condemn me, stone my grave;  
 This be my comfort: one perchance  
 Will see my soul and understand me;

Will feel my thought and my emotions,  
 In flesh and skin my spirit clothe—  
 And if my people gain aught by it,  
 Then I will lie and rot—in peace.

A. B. RHINE.